

# The Light in the Clearing

A Tale of the North Country in the Time of Silas Wright

By IRVING BACHELLER  
Author of "Eben Holden," "Dart and I," "Dance of the Blessed Jains," "Keeping Up With Lizzie," Etc., Etc.

## CHAPTER XI.

The Spirit of Michael Henry and Others.

At the examination of Amos Grimshaw my knowledge was committed to the records and ceased to be a source of danger to me. Grimshaw came to the village that day. On my way to the courtroom I saw him walking slowly, with bent head as I had seen him before, followed by old Kate. She carried her staff in her left hand while the forefinger of her right hand was pointing him out. Silent as a ghost and as unheeded—one would say—she followed his steps.

I observed that old Kate sat on a front seat with her hand to her ear and Grimshaw beside his lawyer at a big table and that when she looked at him her lips moved in a strange unwhispered whisper of her spirit. Her face filled with joy as one darning needle after another came out in the evidence.

The facts hereinbefore alleged, and others, were proved for the tracks fitted the shoes of Amos. The young man was held and presently indicted. The time of his trial was not determined.

I wrote a good hand those days and the leading merchant of the village engaged me to post his books every Saturday at ten cents an hour. Thenceforward until Christmas I gave my free days to that task. I estimated the sum that I should earn and planned to divide it in equal parts and proudly present it to my aunt and uncle on Christmas day.

One Saturday while I was at work on the big ledger of the merchant I ran upon this item:

October 2-8. Wright-To one suit of clothes for Michael Henry from measures furnished by S. Robinson. \$14.30  
Shirts to match ..... 1.70

I knew then the history of the suit of clothes which I had worn since that rainy October night, for I remembered that Sam Robinson, the tailor, had measured me at our house and made up the cloth of Aunt Deel's weaving.

I observed, also, that numerous articles—a lot of wood, two sacks of flour, three pairs of boots, one coat, six pounds of salt pork and four bushels of potatoes—all for "Michael Henry"—had been charged to Silas Wright.

So by the merest chance I learned that the invisible "Michael Henry" was the almoner of the modest statesman and really the spirit of Silas Wright feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and warming the cold house, in the absence of its owner. It was the heart of Wright joined to that of the schoolmaster, which sat in the green chair.

I fear that my work suffered a moment's interruption, for just then I began to know the great heart of the senator. His warmth was in the clothing that covered my back, its delicacy in the ignorance of those who had shared its benefactions.

I count this one of the great events of my youth. But there was a greater one, although it seemed not so at the time of it. A traveler on the road to Ballybeen had dropped his pocketbook containing a large amount of money—\$27.00 was the sum, if I remember rightly. He was a man who, being justly suspicious of the banks, had withdrawn his money. Posters announced the loss and the offer of a large reward. The village was profoundly stirred by them. Searching parties went up the road stirring its dust and groping in its grass and briars for the great prize which was supposed to be lying there. It was said, however, that the quest had been unsuccessful. So the lost pocketbook became a treasured mystery of the village and of all the hills and valleys toward Ballybeen—a topic of old wives and gabbling husbands at the fireside for unnumbered years.

By and by the fall term of school ended. Uncle Peabody came down to get me the day before Christmas. I had enjoyed my work and my life at the "Hacketts", on the whole, but I was glad to be going home again. My uncle was in high spirits and there were many packages in the sleigh.

"A merry Christmas to ye both an' may the Lord love ye!" said Mr. Hackett as he bade us goodbye. "Every day our thoughts will be going up the hills to your house."

The bells rang merrily as we hurried through the swamp in the hard snow paths.

"We're goin' to move," said my uncle presently. "We've agreed to get out by the middle o' May."

"How does that happen?" I asked.

"Settled with Grimshaw and agreed to go. If it hadn't a' been for Wright and Baldwin we wouldn't a' got a cent. They threatened to bid against him at the sale. So he settled. We're goin' to have a new home. We've bought a hundred an' fifty acres from Abe Leonard. Goin' to build a new house in the spring. It will be nearer the village."

He playfully nudged my ribs with his elbow.

"We've had a little good luck, Bart. I went on. 'I'll tell ye what it is if ye won't say anything about it.' I promised.

any braggin'. It ain't anybody's business, anyway. An old uncle over in Vermont died three weeks ago and left us thirty-eight hundred dollars. It was old Uncle Ezra Baynes o' Hinesburg. Died without a chick or child. Your aunt and me slipped down to Potsdam an' took the stage an' went over an' got the money. It was more money than I ever see before in my life. We put it in the bank in Potsdam to keep it out o' Grimshaw's hands. I wouldn't trust that man as fur as you could throw a bull by the tail."

It was a cold, clear night, and when we reached home the new stove was snapping with the heat in its firebox and the pudding puffing in the pot and old Shep dreaming in the chimney corner. Aunt Deel gave me a hug at the door. Shep barked and leaped to my shoulders.

"Why, Bart! You're growin' like a weed—ain't ye?—ayes ye be," my aunt said as she stood and looked at me. "Set right down here an' warm ye—ayes!—I've done all the chores—ayes!"

How warm and comfortable was the dear old room with those beloved faces in it. I wonder if paradise itself can seem more pleasant to me. I have had the best food this world can provide. In my time, but never anything that I ate with a keener relish than the pudding and milk and bread and butter and cheese and pumpkin pie which Aunt Deel gave us that night.

Supper over, I wiped the dishes for my aunt while Uncle Peabody went out to feed and water the horses. Then we sat down in the genial warmth while I told the story of my life in "the busy town," as they called it. What pride and attention they gave me then!

My fine clothes and the story of how I had come by them taxed my ingenuity somewhat, although not improperly. I had to be careful not to let them know that I had been ashamed of the homestead suit. They somehow felt the truth about it and a little silence followed the story. Then Aunt Deel drew her chair near me and touched my hair very gently and looked into my face without speaking.

"Ayes! I know," she said presently, in a kind of caressing tone, with a touch of sadness in it. "They ain't used to coarse homespun stuff down there in the village. They made fun o' ye—didn't they, Bart?"

"I don't care about that," I assured them. "The mind's the measure of the man," I quoted, remembering the lines the Senator had repeated to me. "That's sound!" Uncle Peabody exclaimed with enthusiasm.

Aunt Deel took my hand in hers and surveyed it thoughtfully for a moment without speaking.

"You ain't goin' to have to suffer that way no more," she said in a low tone. "We're goin' to be more comfortable—ayes. Yer uncle thought we better go West, but I couldn't bear to go off so fur an' leave mother an' father an' sister Susan an' all the folks we loved layin' here in the ground alone—I want to lay down with 'em by an' by an' wait for the sound o' the trumpet—ayes!—mebbe it'll be for thousands o' years—ayes!"

To our astonishment the clock struck twelve.

"Hurrah! It's merry Christmas!" said Uncle Peabody as he jumped to his feet and began to sing of the little Lord Jesus.

We joined him while he stood beating time with his right hand after the fashion of a singing master.

"Off with yer boots, friend!" he exclaimed when the stanza was finished. "We don't have to set up and watch like the shepherds."

We drew our boots on the chair round with hands clasped over the knee—how familiar is the process, and yet I haven't seen it in more than half a century! I lighted a candle and scampered upstairs in my stocking feet, Uncle Peabody following close and slapping my thigh as if my pace were not fast enough for him. In the midst of our skylarking the candle tumbled to the floor and I had to go back to the stove and relight it.

How good it seemed to be back in the old room under the shingles! The heat of the stovepipe had warmed its hospitality.

"It's been kind o' lonesome here," said Uncle Peabody as he opened the window. "I always let the wind come in to keep me company—it gits so warm."

"Ye can't look at yer stockin' yit," said Aunt Deel when I came downstairs about eight o'clock, having slept through chime time. I remember it was the delicious aroma of frying ham and buckwheat cakes which awoke me; and who wouldn't rise and shake off the cloak of slumber on a bright, cold winter morning with such provocation?

"This ain't no common Chris'mas—I tell ye," Aunt Deel went on. "Santa Claus won't get here short o' noon I wouldn't wonder—ayes!"

About eleven o'clock Uncle Hiram and Aunt Eliza and their three children arrived with loud and merry greetings. Then came other aunts and uncles and cousins. With what noisy good cheer the men entered the house after they had put up their horses! I remember how they laid their hard, heavy hands on my head and shook it a little as they spoke of my "stretchin' up" or gave me a playful slap on the shoulder—an ancient token of good will—the first form of the accolade, I fancy. What joyful good humor there was in those simple men and women—enough to temper the woes of a city if it could have been applied to their relief. They stood thick around the stove warming themselves and taking off its griddles and opening its doors and surveying it inside and out with much curiosity.

"Now for the Christmas tree," said Uncle Peabody as he led the way into our best room, where a fire was burning in the old Franklin grate. "Come on, boys an' girls."

What a wonderful sight was the Christmas tree—the first we had had in our house—a fine spreading balsam loaded with presents! Uncle Hiram jumped into the air and clapped his feet together and shouted: "Hold me somebody, or I'll grab the bull tree an' run away with it!"

Uncle Jabez held one foot in both hands before him and joyfully hopped around the tree.

These relatives had brought their family gifts, some days before, to be hung on its branches. The thing that caught my eye was a big silver watch hanging by a long golden chain to one of the boughs. Uncle Peabody took it

down and held it aloft by the chain, so that none should miss the sight, saying:

"From Santa Claus for Bart!"

A murmur of admiration ran through



"From Santa Claus for Bart!"

the company which gathered around me as I held the treasure in my trembling hands.

"This is for Bart, too," Uncle Peabody shouted as he took down a bolt of soft blue cloth and laid it in my arms. "Now there's somethin' that's jest about as slick as a kitten's ear. Feel of it. It's for a suit o' clothes. Come all the way from Burlington. Now get-ap there. You've got your load."

I moved out of the way in a hurry of merriment. It was his one great day of pride and vanity. He did not try to conceal them.

The other presents floated for a moment in this irresistible tide of laughing good will and found their owners. I have never forgotten how Uncle Jabez chased Aunt Minerva around the house with a wooden axe cunningly carved and colored. I observed there were many things on the tree which had not been taken down when we younger ones gathered up our wealth and repaired to Aunt Deel's room to feast our eyes upon it and compare our good fortune.

The women and the big girls rolled up their sleeves and went to work with Aunt Deel preparing the dinner. The great turkey and the chicken pie were made ready and put in the oven and the potatoes and the onions and the winter squash were soon boiling in their pots on the stove. Meanwhile the children were playing in my aunt's bedroom and Uncle Hiram and Uncle Jabez were pulling sticks in a corner while the other men sat tipped against the wall watching and making playful comments—all save my Uncle Peabody, who was trying to touch his head to the floor and then straighten up with the aid of the broomstick.

In the midst of it Aunt Deel opened the front door and old Kate, the Silent Woman, entered. To my surprise, she wore a decent-looking dress of gray homespun cloth and a white cloth looped over her head and ears and tied around her neck and a good pair of boots.

"Merry Chris'mas!" we all shouted. She smiled and nodded her head and sat down in the chair which Uncle Peabody had placed for her at the stove.

Aunt Deel took the cloud off her head while Kate drew her mittens—newly knitted of the best yarn. Then my aunt brought some stockings and a shawl from the tree and laid them on the lap of old Kate. What a silence fell upon us as we saw tears coursing down the cheeks of this lonely old woman of the countryside—tears of joy, doubtless, for God knows how long it had been since the poor, abandoned soul had seen a merry Christmas and shared its kindness. I did not fail to observe how clean her face and hands looked! She was greatly changed.

She took my hand as I went to her side and tenderly caressed it. A gentler smile came to her face than ever I had seen upon it. The old stern look returned for a moment as she held one finger aloft in a gesture which only I and my Aunt Deel understood. We knew it signified a peril and a mystery. That I should have to meet it, somewhere up the hidden pathway, I had no doubt whatever.

"Dinner's ready!" exclaimed the cheerful voice of Aunt Deel.

Then what a stirring of chairs and feet as we sat down at the table. Old Kate sat by the side of my aunt and we were all surprised at her good manners.

We jested and laughed and drank cider and reviewed the year's history and ate as only they may eat who have big bones and muscles and the vitality of oxen. I never taste the flavor of sage and currant jelly or hear a hearty laugh without thinking of those holiday dinners in the old log house on Rattleroad.

That Christmas brought me nothing better than those words, the memory of which is one of the tallest towers in that long avenue of my past down which I have been looking these many days. About all you can do for a boy, worth while, is to give him something good to remember.

The day had turned dark. The temperature had risen and the air was dank and chilly. The men began to hitch up their horses.

So, one by one, the sleighs left us with cheery good-bys and a grind-

ing of runners and a jingling of bells. When the last had gone Uncle Peabody and I went into the house. Aunt Deel sat by the stove, old Kate by the window looking out at the falling dusk. How still the house seemed!

"There's one thing I forgot," I said as I proudly took out of my wallet the

six one-dollar bills which I had earned by working Saturdays and handed three of them to my aunt and three to my uncle, saying:

"That is my Christmas present to you. I earned it myself."

I remember so well their astonishment and the trembling of their hands and the look of their faces.

"It's grand—ayes!" Aunt Deel said in a low tone.

She rose in a moment and beckoned to me and my uncle. We followed her through the open door to the other room.

"I'll tell ye what I'd do," she whispered. "I'd give 'em to ol' Kate—ayes! She's goin' to stay with us till tomorrow."

"Good idee!" said Uncle Peabody.

So I took the money out of their hands and went in and gave it to the Silent Woman.

"That's your present from me," I said.

How can I forget how she held my arm against her with that loving, familiar, rocking motion of a woman who is soothing a baby at her breast and kissed my coat sleeve? She released my arm and, turning to the window, leaned her head upon its sill and shook with sobs. The dusk had thickened. As I returned to my seat by the stove I could dimly see her form against the light of the window. We sat in silence for a little while.

Then Uncle Peabody rose and got a candle and lighted it at the hearth.

I held the lantern while Uncle Peabody fed the sheep and the two cows and milked—a slight chore these winter days.

"You and I are to go off to bed purty early," he said as we were going back to the house. "Yer Aunt Deel wants to see Kate alone and git her to talk if she can."

"I dunno but she'll swing back into this world ag'in," said Uncle Peabody when we had gone up to our little room. "I guess all she needs is to be treated like a human bein'. Yer Aunt Deel an' I couldn't git over thinkin' o' what she done for you that night in the ol' barn. So I took some o' yer aunt's good clothes to her an' a pair o' boots an' asked her to come to Chris'mas. She lives in a little room over the blacksmith shop down to Butterfield's mill. I told her I'd come after her with the cutter but she shook her head. I knew she'd rather walk."

He was yawning as he spoke and soon we were both asleep under the shingles.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



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## DADDY'S EVENING FAIRY TALE

By Mary Graham Bonner

### THE JUMPING SPIDER.

"Ah," said the jumping spider to the caterpillar, "it is almost time for us to awaken."

"You are right," said the caterpillar. "Spring is almost here. And with spring comes the changes, the beautiful, beautiful changes."

"I change from a caterpillar. I become a thing of exquisite beauty."

"What do you mean by 'exquisite'?" asked the jumping spider.

"Exquisite," said the caterpillar, "means just too perfect for words. It means something lovely, and beautiful, and de-

lightful, and wonderful.

"It means a great deal," said the jumping spider.

"Naturally," said the caterpillar, "it's a great word. Well, as I was saying, spring is the beautiful time of the year when the flowers burst into bloom, the buds open, the leaves begin to appear, butterflies and chrysalis creatures follow. Ah, the spring is wondrous."

"Well, neither of us think much of the winter," said the jumping spider, "for both of us sleep in the winter. I got all ready for my sleep last autumn."

"So did I," said the caterpillar. "I fuss a good deal before I am all ready. I have to see that I am safe and secure from other creatures who might disturb my winter's nap. I do some interesting things, you know."

"Tell me about them," said the jumping spider politely.

"I belong to the family of caterpillars which weaves its own chrysalis cases out of hairs and wool from its summer coats. Some of the families find some silk which they have grown within themselves which they use."

"Sounds very strange to me," said the jumping spider.

"It does sound strange," said the caterpillar, "but it is true."

"I am glad to hear about you," said the jumping spider.

"I have told you about myself, and now I must nap a little longer before I get up and get ready for the beautiful spring. I am not quite, quite awake yet, but I have begun to stir and soon, very soon, I will be very, very wide awake."

"But just before I take one little nap more, won't you tell me about yourself, Jumping Spider, for I am sure you must be interesting? In fact I know you are interesting. And I would like to hear your story before we both leave each other entirely."

"It is strange that we should have chosen our winter home so near each other. Hurry and tell your story, for I see you are really wide awake."

"And why wouldn't I be pretty wide awake with all the eyes I have?" asked the jumping spider.

"All the eyes?" repeated the caterpillar.

"Yes," said the jumping spider, "my name and the fact that I can jump amounts to very little when you think of my eyes."

"I will think of your eyes, but tell me more about them so I can think more," said the caterpillar.

"I have been in this closely woven tent," said the jumping spider, "as you can see. It is here I have stayed all winter. As you see, I have a good, broad nose. I would hate to have a little narrow nose, or, in short, any other kind of a nose than the one I have."

"It is nice to be satisfied," said the caterpillar.

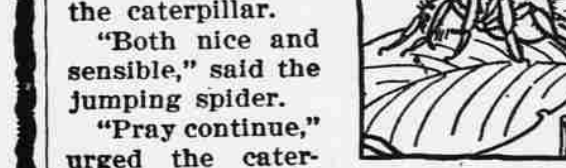
"Both nice and sensible," said the jumping spider.

"Pray continue," urged the caterpillar.

"My eyes are very small in size, and they look like little beads," continued the jumping spider. "But it makes no difference if they are small, for I have several pairs of eyes, I have."

"I feel very sorry for the poor creatures who have only one pair of eyes. And so, you see, when I become wide awake I become very wide awake, for I have so many eyes to open."

"Ah me, ah my, it is fine to be a jumping spider with many eyes, several pairs of eyes at least, and to wake up in the spring after a good, long, refreshing sleep," ended the jumping spider.



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